

The Ballad of Roger Kowalski

By Paul Palubicki

I'm no stranger to sadness. I was given up for dead in the dank, putrid swamps of the Okefenokee and fended for myself until a kindly Indian chief took me to his lean-to and lashed me to a tree. The tree was about three feet from the water's edge, and when I asked why he tied me there, he told me that I was bait for Roger Kowalski, the craftiest gator in the Florida swampland.

You see, the Chief had a grudge against this gator since it ravaged his village many moons ago. His people were attempting to build a nice, respectable casino out in the swamps to attract tourists. They had hoped it would one day be a major alternative to Orlando, but the lack of roads or navigable waterways stymied progress, leaving a tribe of forlorn Indians standing behind makeshift blackjack tables, as well as gift shops full of authentic Indian blankets saturated with authentic smallpox infections.

It was around this time that Roger Kowalski showed up. You see, Roger always had a snout for business and he knew a golden opportunity when he saw one. One day, he scooted up to a riverbank and ate a small child to get everyone's attention. As the people raced to the riverbank, the Chief implored them to stay at their gaming tables, as a carload of wayward tourists from Poughkeepsie was bound to show up at any moment. Besides, he said, that gator ain't never been anyone's friend and you really shouldn't trust anything that evolved over 200 million years ago. Nothing good ever came out of the Triassic, not the least of which was Roger Kowalski.

But the people would not listen to their Chief. They remembered the good old days, when they sat around complaining about how snobby the Seminole were and how they were too good for the swamp. Every now and then, a Seminole would come by in his flashy blue jeans and fancy '74 El Camino to rub their faces in his tribe's good fortune. They had a football team named after them, after all, and what higher plateau of success could anyone ever hope to achieve?

Roger Kowalski knew all about their resentment and used it to his advantage. He told the people that the reason their casino had failed was due to a lack of advertising. After all, how can anyone come out here if they don't know you exist? Roger told the people that they needed to build a sign tall enough to be seen from the highway, which meant a huge tower needed to be erected right on this very spot.

The Chief warned the people not listen to the gator's smooth words and pleasant promises, for his way led to ruin. After all, he reminded them, it was the gators who served as scouts and guides for the German army that conquered their ancestors and sold their powdered organs as aphrodisiacs on the Asian market. But the people would not listen. Seduced by dreams of neon and steel, they erected a huge tower and placed upon it a massive sign reading, "Indian Gaming!" A large arrow pointed downwards, just in case there was any doubt as to where the Indian gaming may be found.

The tourists did come and they did game. They brought with them their children and pets, their greedy land developers, their corporate sponsors, and their nudists. Roger Kowalski negotiated several important deals, including the development of hotels, restaurants, and a theme park. The Indians, though, increasingly felt left out of this newfound wealth. No

one bought their blankets or misshapen pottery, nor was anyone dumping buckets of cash at their gaming tables.

Nope, everyone was flocking to the recently opened themed casino: Stalag Nights. With its cinder block walls and romantic guard towers, the casino attracted and delighted crowds with its hourly “Escape from Stalag Nights Extravaganza!” show, featuring an authentic simulated escape ending in a blazing gun battle, as the escapees crossed the wire and were blown to smithereens by the minefield before being finished off by rabid german shepherds. After the show, the entrants were treated to a unique experience seen nowhere else in the world: a spooky train ride inside cattle cars to the “depot” where they were “deloused” with pure, Columbian-grade cocaine and marched off to the gaming tables.

The Indians, though, were not happy. While everyone else seemed to be having a good time, they were still sitting in the swamp and whining about the Seminoles. They complained to the Chief, but he would have none of it. He told them that they would not listen to him before, so he would not speak to them now. The Indians then went to see Roger Kowalski, who thrice daily entertained crowds with tricks and amazing feats of feasting. As he sat in his multi-million dollar tank fashioned to look exactly like the swamp surrounding it, the people complained that they were not seeing any of the good fortune that the tourists had brought. Roger promised them that they had come at just the right time for an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime offer.

Since their casino wasn't doing very well, he told them that he'd take pity on them, seeing as how they were old friends and all, and he'd buy it from them for a full 35% stake in Stalag Nights. This seemed like a good deal to the people, so they took it. There

was only one condition: they had to agree to work in the casino for 30 days before they received their stake. That was a fair deal, considering Florida's obscure labor laws, so the people agreed to Roger's terms and readied themselves for the first full day of employment most of them had ever seen.

When they arrived, the casino handlers instructed them to remove their clothing and wear official Stalag Nights uniforms. Afterwards, they were told to wait in a holding area for their assignments, which would be forthcoming. After waiting for an hour, the people became unsettled, but one of the casino bosses finally appeared and directed them to face the door behind them. Once it opened, they were told to run out and enthusiastically greet the guests.

Afterwards, the German shepherds reported the Indians to be "tasty" and 9 out of 10 would recommend the dish to their friends and colleagues. Of course, they didn't have much time to sit and quietly digest their meal, as the hourly explosions from the minefield over the past several months had unsettled the swampy foundations of the freakishly huge advertising tower until it finally relented in its contest against gravity. It groaned and squealed as stresses ran up and down its spindly frame before beginning its inexorable fall to the ground. The tourists' screams were quickly silenced from tons of falling debris that choked the very breath out of them, while others barely escaped the catastrophe, only to find themselves forever lost in the endless wastes of the Everglades.

Roger Kowalski collected the insurance claims from the destroyed properties and sold the remains for scrap, leaving nothing of the casino megaplex's existence behind except for a trail of crushed beer cans and broken promises. He slid back into the water, never to be seen again.

After the Chief told me his tale, I spotted two iridescent eyes glittering at the water's edge. Consumed by fear, I pointed at the water in shocked silence. The Chief took a long, hard look and let out a belch of disgust. "That's just Dean. No matter what he says, those damned car stereos are Sparkomatics, not Alpines. Christ, it looks like someone just scrawled 'Alpine' over the tape deck cover with freakin' finger paint. The tape deck cover, Dean! I mean, who has those anymore? Seriously."

Soon after, I traded a used gum wrapper for my freedom and made it out of the swamp. I emerged onto a lone highway losing its battle against the invading kudzu and headed north for the promised land of Tallahassee. But that's a different story.

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